



Africa's Fashion Diaspora

A Queen's Tale collection, silk "Oshun" caftan, resort 2019

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Africa's Fashion Diaspora explores the concept of Black culture and delves into how Black fashion designers continue to explore those roots and their dialogue in fashion. (Africa's Fashion Diaspora, 2024) The exhibition showcases the profound connections and expressions of Black identity. Africa's Fashion Diaspora was created by Elizabeth Way; the Couture Council of the Museum at FIT sponsored the exhibition. FIT's Africa's Fashion Diaspora transcends the boundaries of gender, geography, sexual orientation, and religion by featuring Black designers with a global impact. We see the interrelation between Black communities, featuring sixty ensembles and accessories created by black designers from Africa, South America, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe, taking complex inspiration from their roots. The exhibition is the first to explore how 20th- and 21st-century fashion designers contribute to the conversation of Black identity and its connection to Afrocentricity(FIT, 2024).

"Birth of Oshun" focuses on the powerful reinterpretation of heritage, beauty, and spirituality. The garment was created by Felicia Noel and was inspired by Harmonia Rosales and her painting of the "Birth of Oshun." In the painting, Oshun, the Yoruba Orisha of love, fertility, and rivers, is depicted as Sandro Botticelli's Venus, challenging the Eurocentric beauty standard on a global scale and empowering Black beauty. This garment celebrates African religion and cultural heritage and explores Afro-diasporic identities in Afro-Cuban roots, showing how African culture inspires and reshapes other cultures globally. Understanding these expressions is vital to recognizing the resilience and creativity of Black people, who are asserting their cultural legacies and creating a tapestry of shared histories and visions that cross-cultural and geographical boundaries. (Africa's Fashion Diaspora, 2024)

A line is a continuous mark, that defines shapes and directs the eye's attention. The design elements are further reinforced by the line composition of the gown, the horizontal skyline furthers the theme of tranquility(Bell & Ternus, 2006). The diagonal lines that flow from the draping of the sleeves create a dynamic and balanced, focal point (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The curved lines in the flowing garment and the inside of the shell emphasize movement from figure to figure. The thin vertical lines of the peacock feather juxtaposed with the goddess presenting majestic strength (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The fine lines in the peacock feathers add intricacy and detail to the composition.

Dominance emphasizes the most important elements in a composition to guide the viewer's focus (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The placement of Oshun in the center of the composition ensures that all other elements revolve around her. Oshun's radiant golden vitiligo spots allude to her dominant divinity as the central figure, establishing her as the focal point (Rosales, 2024). The size of her figure relative to others reinforces her centrality, making her the most visually significant element. Additionally, the luminosity of the gold tones and the intricate details of her figure further draw the viewer's attention (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The voluminous sleeves guide

the views focus to the garment. Through dominance, the artist underscores Oshun's importance within the narrative and the composition.

Form refers to the three-dimensional quality of objects in a composition (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The shading and highlights of the illustration of Oshun give her a lifelike, three-dimensional appearance. The curvature of the shell further adds volume and dimension, grounding Oshun within the scene (Bell & Ternus, 2006). These forms create depth within the image, making it feel immersive and tangible. The interplay of light and shadow throughout the artwork enhances the sense of form, bringing the various elements to life.

The Caftan dress is made of silk. One can see the fabric is silk from the soft, smooth, lightweight, and lustrous appearance of the fabric. (Bell & Ternus, 2006) Caftans are a variant style of robe. Caftans made of silk were associated with foreign luxury. (Cultural selection: Chinese, Sogdian, and Byzantine influences on caftans uncovered from archaeological sites along the Silk Roads, 2024) The texture of the garment signifies its softness and femininity. The theme of foreign luxury can be depicted in the illustration of Oshun as the goddess Venus; the theme questions Eurocentric values in the luxury market. Oshun stands modestly as she conceals certain parts of her body, expressing themes of divine femininity.

The oversized shape of the garment hides the bodice of the mannequin. The garment's collar is slightly off the shoulder, resting right on the edge of the mannequin's shoulders. The sleeves are attached to loose, cascading flounce sleeves. The sleeves drape beyond the end of the dress and to the sides, reaching the very tops of the ankles. On the bodice, at the center of the garment, is the painting.

The significance of the dress lies in the artistry and reimagined imagery created by Harmonia Rosales. The "Birth of Oshun" is an Afrocentric reinterpretation of the Birth of Venus. The imagery evokes divinity and synchronicity. The light skyline depicts tranquility, clarity, and innocence (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The bright skyline against the goddess's melanated skin adds drama to the piece. Both the soft blue and pink serve as complimentary colors to one another, bringing out the brilliance of each other (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The blues of the ocean convey cooling and calming imagery. The pastel pink expresses warmth and softness. (Bell & Ternus, 2006) The colors within the imagery invited the guest into the world of natural divinity.

Balance is the distribution of visual weight within a composition to achieve harmony (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The artwork achieves symmetrical balance by placing Oshun at the center, this symmetrical arrangement ensures that the composition feels stable and well-proportioned. The distribution of warm and cool tones also contributes to the balance, with Oshun's melanated complexion and the glowing gold contrasting one another giving expressions of duality (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The cooler blues and greens of the surrounding figures and the soft warm pink of

the sleeves create a balance between the hues (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The sleeves create symmetry and balance for the garment (Bell & Ternus, 2006). Additionally, placing elements like the peacock feathers and the shell further reinforces this sense of balance directing the eye to the central figure. By maintaining equilibrium, the garment creates a visually pleasing and cohesive composition.

Contrast refers to the difference between elements that create visual interest and draw the viewer's attention (Bell & Ternus, 2006). In "Birth of Oshun," the juxtaposition of Oshun's glowing gold within her skin creates contrast (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The darker blues and greens of the surrounding landscape highlight her prominence and the warm pink sleeve juxtaposed to the edges of the bodice creates contrast as well (Bell & Ternus, 2006). Light and shadow are effectively contrasted throughout the piece to create depth and focus. These voluminous sleeves adhered to the bodice gown contrast with the delicate imagery depicting Oshun making the goddess the focal point, emphasizing her central role.

Proportion refers to the relative size and scale of elements within a composition (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The figures in "Birth of Oshun" are proportionately designed to maintain realism while emphasizing Oshun's significance. The large shell is slightly exaggerated, enhancing its symbolic importance and visual impact. Oshun's figure is slightly larger than the surrounding figures, further establishing her centrality and dominance (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The proportion of the sleeves on the garments contributes to the overall harmony of the piece centralizing the Goddess. The horizontal draping of the ruffles creates a wider appearance for the garment (Bell & Ternus, 2006). By carefully considering proportion, the designer creates a dress that feels balanced and visually compelling.

Repetition involves using elements multiple times to unify a composition and create consistency (Bell & Ternus, 2006). Embedded within the fabric was the same the repetition of the older black women creating a pattern, the repetition repeating the narrative of honoring one's ancestry. The recurrence of waves in the background unites the natural elements, reinforcing the theme of fluidity. Golden tones are repeated throughout Oshun, tying her visually to the divine and luxurious theme. By employing repetition, the designer ensures that the composition feels unified and harmonious.

Rhythm is defined by the repetition of elements to create a visual tempo (Bell & Ternus, 2006). The rhythm and repetition of cascading sleeves lead viewers' eyes from the dominant sleeves to the garment's center, featuring Oshun. The rhythmic pattern of the waves brings balance, fluidity, and a natural element to the painting. The rhythmic pattern of the gold vitiligo scattered across her skin (Rosales, n.d.), presents themes of optimism (Bell & Ternus, 2006). These repeating elements help signify the natural, soft focal point within the garment.

The exhibition, curated by Elizabeth Way, emphasizes how Black fashion designers leverage their artistic talents to tell stories and reconnect with their African roots. Professor Wilson from Columbia University stated, "All of these things, sort of are the kinds of threads that weave together connections of diaspora." (Garcia, 2024) These connections not only explore shared heritage but also expose historical problems and contemporary struggles. The exhibition's fashion is a powerful expression of Black identity on an international scale, and its impact that remains to this day.

In the "History is Political" section, the exhibit showcases the powerful role of fashion and culture, resistance, unity, and expression within Black communities across the globe. The section explores the roots of Afro-centrism and identity while bringing visibility to Afro-Latino culture. This section of the exhibition expresses how Black identity is inseparable from historical and ongoing struggles, such as the effects of colonialism and transatlantic slavery. (Africa's Fashion Diaspora, 2024) The "Birth of Oshun" focuses on fashion as a medium of cultural production and appreciation. The "History is Political" section highlights the multifaceted narratives and historical struggles embedded in each garment, honoring shared roots.

Rosale's birth of Oshun, within the context of the African fashion diaspora, reflects how fashion can serve as a bridge between history and artistic expression. The garment, inspired by Rosale's reinterpretation of Botticelli's Birth of Venus, uses Afrocentric themes and Yoruba spirituality to challenge the Eurocentric beauty standard. The reimagined orisha of love, rivers, and fertility allows fashion to become a medium for celebrating Afro-diasporic heritage and identity. (FIT, 2024) Noel brings up prominent questions on the value of the Eurocentric beauty standard and how it relates to luxury and fashion. Noel's garment invokes the question, "What is luxury fashion, and how does that translate in today's diverse market?" Within the loose, cascading flounce sleeve is a faded, imprinted image of a Black woman from colonial times, revealing the theme of how African practices evolved within Caribbean culture. The imagery on the flounce sleeve further alludes to how the origins have built a foundation to represent Black beauty, which is depicted in the center graphic.

The "history is political" section includes garments that address the legacies of colonialism and slavery and explore the resistance and resilience that remain against systematic oppression. The garment created by Ms. Noel, with its reference to Rosale's birth of Oshun, highlights how fashion mirrors life by using cultural symbols to answer societal standards. The luxurious silk and captivating design reveal the imperialistic dialogue while expressing its theme of luxury, femininity, and divinity. Through exhibitions, society learns to appreciate artistic expression on a deeper level, revealing the rich cultural contributions of other cultures on an international scale. With the need for diversity and inclusion in today's fashion landscape, one will continue to see conversation on identity and how it evolves the cultural landscape on an international scale.

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